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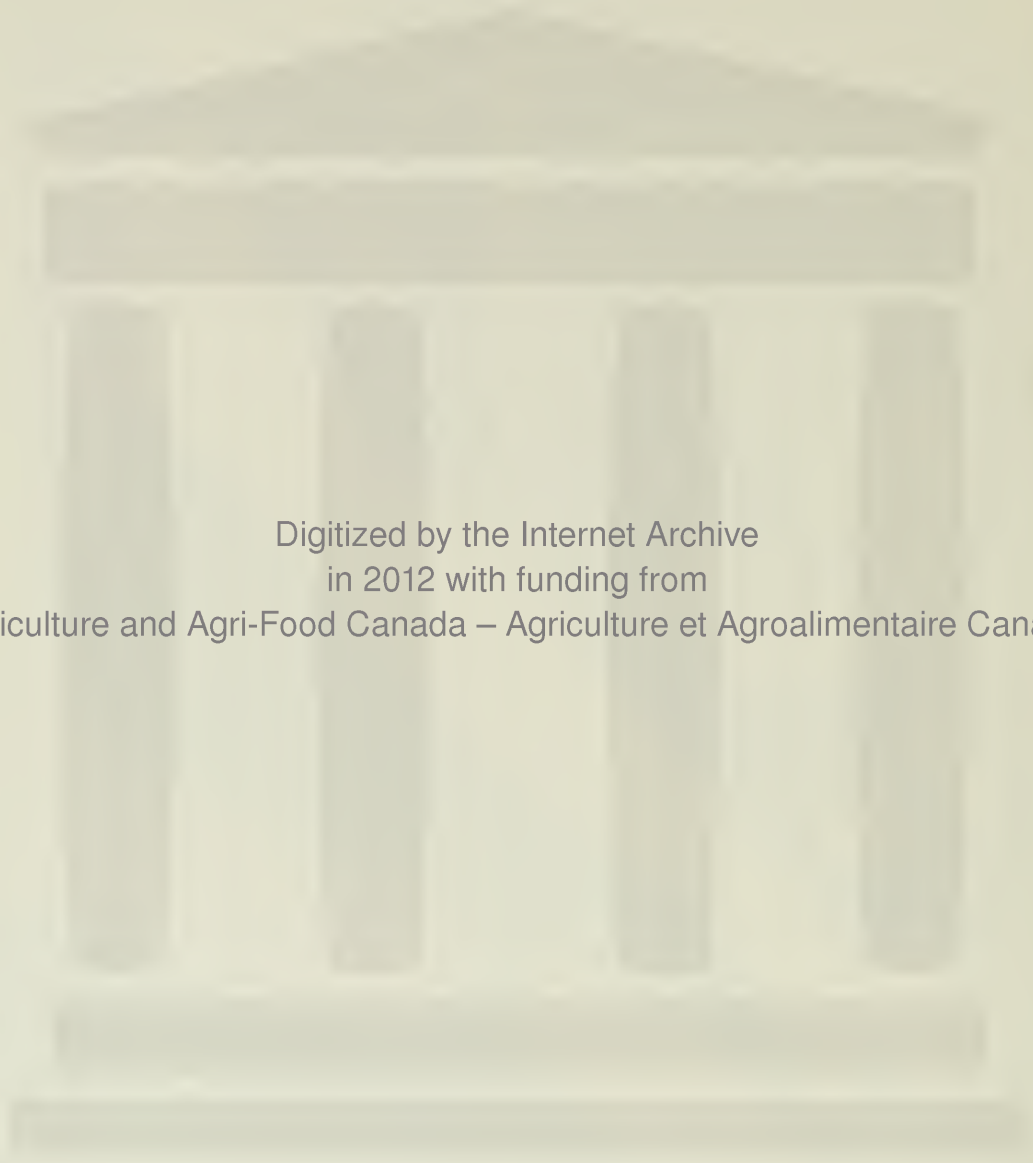
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CARE OF GIFT PLANTS

by Tom Sharkey¹

INTRODUCTION

Gift plants sold at Christmas and Easter are normally in full bloom when purchased. These plants have been grown in the controlled environment of a greenhouse. If they are to thrive, the first obstacle to be overcome is their transition from the 'ideal' environment to the overheated, dry atmosphere of the average home or apartment.

Generally, gift plants are sold for their blossom. To do well they require excellent light if not actual direct sunlight. However, plants such as cyclamens, azaleas and Easter lilies need to be cool and this may create a problem. In winter, place these plants close to a south-facing window. The heat of direct sunlight is counteracted by the cold seeping through the window. In summer, place such plants in an eastern window where they will get direct sunlight until about 9 or 10 a.m. only.

Most houseplants are overwatered. Even those requiring high humidity and moisture in the soil, such as azaleas, are damaged if kept wet rather than constantly moist. On receipt of a gift plant, remove any colored foil or paper from the bottom of the pot so that the drainage holes are uncovered. Place a saucer under the plant pot to prevent damage to furniture by the water overflow.

SOIL

As plants generally come from a commercial greenhouse it may be assumed that they are growing in the right soil mix. Normally, such soils contain a high proportion of humus and drain readily.

Soil problems are not likely to occur during the short life of gift plants. However, if they are to be kept for some time they may require repotting. A good general soil mix is 50% good garden soil, 25% peat moss or leaf mold and 25% of vermiculite-sand mixture.

INSECTS AND DISEASES

On receiving a gift plant, keep it away from other houseplants for about 2 weeks. Examine it carefully every 2 – 3 days to see that no insects are present. Don't forget to observe the soil also; if it is infested with insects they will most likely be evident when you water the plant. During the winter when it is difficult to air out the house, it is advisable to use insecticides derived from vegetative sources — the so-called

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“botanicals” such as pyrethrum and rotenone. These are less hazardous to humans and do not have the unpleasant odors associated with some chemical controls.

CARE DURING OWNER’S ABSENCE

Care of houseplants over a period of 3 – 4 weeks, while the householder is away, requires careful planning.

Provide detailed instructions to the friend or neighbor who will look after them. If this is not possible, the following procedure gives good results:

Fill the bathtub with 7 – 10 cm (3 – 4 in.) of water and place empty pots upside down in this, setting your plants on each one so that the bottom of the plant pot is just above the water level. Cover the bathtub with a thin sheet of clear plastic such as the plastic bags which enclose clothes from the cleaners. Leave the bathroom light on.

There are also self-watering wicks, automatic light-controlling devices and other gadgets which may be useful.

WATERING

A general rule to follow is to water thoroughly when you do water.

If the water appears to run straight through the pot as quickly as it is applied, it may indicate that there is a very high proportion of fibrous material in the soil mix. In such a case, the pot should be placed in a container of warm water, about 5 cm (2 in.) deep, and allowed to soak for about 15 minutes. This ensures thorough soaking of the fibrous material in the soil mix. It should then be allowed to drain for about an hour before returned to its saucer.

Normally, tap water is too cold and contains too much chlorine and fluoride for good plant growth. For better results, fill a container with water and let it stand overnight. This allows the water to reach room temperature and the chlorine and other gases to escape.

Never use water that has passed through a water softener as it contains too many salts.

PLANT HYGIENE

Plants breathe through minute openings on the underside of the leaves called stomata. Leaves that have a large surface collect a great deal of dust and should be wiped clean once a week with a damp, soft cloth. Support the leaves with the palm of the hand while wiping them and clean both sides.

Plants that have leaves with soft, hairy surfaces such as African violets, episcias and gloxinias should not be washed. Brush them clean with a small, soft-bristled artist’s brush.

The following summarizes basic care for the most common gift plants:

Azalea

LOCATION — Azaleas require a bright sunny window but need to be kept as cool as possible.

WATERING AND SOIL — Keep potted azaleas constantly moist but do not allow water to remain in saucer. Use water that has been boiled and allowed to cool. Azaleas must have an acid soil. Use pure peat moss or a mix of sand and peat moss when repotting.

CULTURAL CARE — As the blossoms fade, pinch them off. When flowering is over, keep the plant growing in the same location feeding it with a diluted solution of plant food once a month.

Keep the acidity of the soil up by watering with 1 teaspoon of vinegar in 1 quart of water every 2 weeks or dust with ¼ teaspoon of sulphur on the soil surface once a month.

Christmas Pepper

LOCATION — Christmas peppers prefer a bright sunny window.

WATERING AND SOIL — Keep this plant moist but not wet; spray the foliage daily. A good soil mix is 1 part loam, 2 parts sand, 2 parts peat moss.

CULTURAL CARE — After the plant has grown fruit, cut each shoot back by about one third its length to encourage new growth. Usually Christmas peppers are discarded after the first season and new plants are started from seed.

Bud drop is usually due to insufficient light or too dry a soil.

Cyclamen

LOCATION — Cyclamens prefer bright light but not direct sunlight. Keep them as cool as possible (15 – 18°C).

WATERING AND SOIL — Keep this plant constantly moist but do not wet the foliage or crown of the plant, as it is subject to crown rot. Cyclamens prefer a rich loam with plenty of humus.

CULTURAL CARE — Pull out the stalks of spent flowers as they fade. Feed the plant a diluted solution of plant food every 2 weeks while it is in bud and bloom. When the plant has finished blooming, dry off the corm by watering only twice a month until the leaves become loose and can be detached from the corm. Then put the pot in the basement to completely dry out for about 90 days.

To start growth again, bring it back up into the light, scrape off and replace the top 5 cm (2 in.) of soil and water lightly until leaves appear. As the foliage grows, increase the amount of water.

This is a difficult plant to grow in the home as the average house temperature is too high.

Easter Lily

LOCATION — Keep Easter lilies in a bright cool window.

WATERING AND SOIL — Keep the soil moist. Usually it comes from the florist with the pot wrapped in colored foil; be sure to cut a hole in the bottom of the foil to allow for drainage.

CULTURAL CARE — The blooms will last longer if the anthers (the yellow pollen bearing pods) are removed from the center of the flowers.

Cut off the flowers as they fade and, when the danger of frost is over, unpot and transplant in the garden. It may bloom again in late fall but is unlikely to overwinter.

Gardenia

LOCATION — This is a difficult plant to maintain in the average home or apartment. Any sudden change in air temperature will cause the buds to drop. During winter months, keep it in a bright sunny window and at a temperature of 21 – 23°C during the day but about 15 – 18°C at night.

WATERING AND SOIL — Keep the gardenia plant constantly moist. Mist water over the foliage every day and maintain good drainage. Since the soil must be acid, make up a solution of ammonium sulphate (1 level teaspoon to 1 quart of water) and apply a cupful of the solution once a month during March to November.

CULTURAL CARE — Feed mild solutions of soluble plant food such as RX-15 every 2 weeks when in bud and flower.

Gloxinia

LOCATION — Gloxinias require bright light but not direct sunlight; also they prefer high humidity and cool temperatures (18 – 21°C).

WATERING AND SOIL — Do not wet the foliage; rather, soak the plant and allow it to dry a little between soakings. A good soil mix is 2 parts sandy loam, 1 part peat moss, 1 part vermiculite.

CULTURAL CARE — Feed gloxinias with a diluted solution of plant food every 2 weeks when in bud and flower. In the fall, dry off the plant by withholding water and rest the tuber in the pot, in the basement and in low light conditions until March. To restart growth, bring it back into the light and water sparingly until leaves begin to appear.

This plant can be propagated from leaf-cuttings.

Jerusalem Cherry

LOCATION — Place the Jerusalem cherry in a bright sunny window where it will be cool (18°C).

WATERING AND SOIL — Keep this plant constantly moist but do not allow water to remain in the saucer. Mist spray the foliage every day with water at room temperature. A good soil mix is 2 parts soil, 1 part peat moss, 1 part sand.

CULTURAL CARE — Note that the fruit of this plant is poisonous and should be kept out of the reach of children and pets. Jerusalem cherries need to be pruned back and repotted each spring. During the summer, feed them twice a month with soluble plant food if kept indoors. Since this plant does not flower or set fruit very readily indoors, it is best to summer this plant in the garden, burying it to the rim of the pot in a sunny location. Before frost is likely to occur, bring in the plant and place it in a cool location and in bright light (but not direct sunlight) for about a month. Keep it constantly moist by mist spraying the foliage every day. Do not fertilize at this time.

Leaf drop and fruit drop are usually caused by too much water, poor light, too dry an atmosphere or insufficient light.

Usually the Jerusalem cherry will not last longer than two or three seasons. Gather fruit as it drops and plant the seeds in spring to have new plants as replacements.

Poinsettia

LOCATION — Place poinsettias in a bright sunny window but close to glass to keep cool (18°C). Keep them free from drafts of hot or cold air from home heating system.

WATERING AND SOIL — Soak this plant well, then allow it to dry out a little between waterings. Watch the leaves; when they show a tendency to droop, soak the plant again. Poinsettias prefer rich soil with plenty of humus.

CULTURAL CARE — Poinsettias can be brought round for a second or even third season.

When the red bracts fade (usually in January to March) allow the soil to dry out by withholding water. Place the plant in a cool place and cut the shoots back by about one third their length.

Water just enough to keep the plant alive. Return it to the light or to the outside garden in late May and start watering regularly. Feed it a soluble plant food at half the recommended dosage once a month.

Bring the poinsettia indoors in early September and place it in a bright cool window. The plant must be subjected to a short day routine for about 60 days, i.e., it must be in the complete dark between 5:00 p.m. and 9:00 a.m. next morning.

Temperatures below 15°C, too dry a soil, or sudden fluctuations in temperature will cause yellowing of leaves and premature leaf drop.

Potted Chrysanthemum

LOCATION — Place potted chrysanthemums in a bright sunny window but close to glass to keep them cool (18°C). Keep free from drafts of hot or cold air from home heating system.

WATERING AND SOIL — Keep this plant constantly moist, but do not allow water to remain in the saucer. Potted 'mums prefer rich porous soil as good drainage essential.

CULTURAL CARE — The florists' potted 'mum has been forced in a greenhouse and will not live outside over winter. To carry it over for a second blooming, keep pinching off the blossoms as they fade, then cut back all shoots to 10 – 15 cm (4 – 6 in.). Continue to grow the plant in a bright light. In the first week of July, pinch out the tips of each shoot to keep the plant bushy.

Feed with soluble plant food at half the recommended strength every 2 weeks. With luck, a second flowering may be produced after which the plant should be discarded. This second flowering is usually disappointing and the plant is very leggy.

Reiger Begonia

LOCATION — This begonia prefers bright light but not direct sunlight (except in winter). Also, it prefers to be cool (18°C).

WATERING AND SOIL — Keep this plant constantly moist. It prefers a porous mix with plenty of humus.

CULTURAL CARE — Reiger begonias flower for several months at a time. As flowering begins to taper off, cut back to 10 cm (4 in.) stubs, clear off all plant debris and repot into a slightly larger diameter pot, taking care that the ball of earth is set slightly higher than the surrounding soil, to prevent crown rot developing. New shoots will grow from the base of the plant and it should blossom again in 3 – 4 months. Fertilize sparingly each month.

There are two types of Reiger begonias: erect growing (Schwabenland) and pendulous (Aphrodite).



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CONVERSION FACTORS FOR METRIC SYSTEM

Imperial units	Approximate conversion factor	Results in:	
LINEAR			
inch	x 25	millimetre	(mm)
foot	x 30	centimetre	(cm)
yard	x 0.9	metre	(m)
mile	x 1.6	kilometre	(km)
AREA			
square inch	x 6.5	square centimetre	(cm ²)
square foot	x 0.09	square metre	(m ²)
acre	x 0.40	hectare	(ha)
VOLUME			
cubic inch	x 16	cubic centimetre	(cm ³)
cubic foot	x 28	cubic decimetre	(dm ³)
cubic yard	x 0.8	cubic metre	(m ³)
fluid ounce	x 28	millilitre	(mL)
pint	x 0.57	litre	(L)
quart	x 1.1	litre	(L)
gallon	x 4.5	litre	(L)
WEIGHT			
ounce	x 28	gram	(g)
pound	x 0.45	kilogram	(kg)
short ton (2000 lb)	x 0.9	tonne	(t)
TEMPERATURE			
degrees Fahrenheit	(° F-32) x 0.56 or (° F-32) x 5/9	degrees Celsius	(° C)
PRESSURE			
pounds per square inch	x 6.9	kilopascal	(kPa)
POWER			
horsepower	x 746	watt	(W)
	x 0.75	kilowatt	(kW)
SPEED			
feet per second	x 0.30	metres per second	(m/s)
miles per hour	x 1.6	kilometres per hour	(km/h)
AGRICULTURE			
gallons per acre	x 11.23	litres per hectare	(L/ha)
quarts per acre	x 2.8	litres per hectare	(L/ha)
pints per acre	x 1.4	litres per hectare	(L/ha)
fluid ounces per acre	x 70	millilitres per hectare	(mL/ha)
tons per acre	x 2.24	tonnes per hectare	(t/ha)
pounds per acre	x 1.12	kilograms per hectare	(kg/ha)
ounces per acre	x 70	grams per hectare	(g/ha)
plants per acre	x 2.47	plants per hectare	(plants/ha)

